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C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000677

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR DRL AND NEA/MAG

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/09/2019  
TAGS: [ELAB](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: PRESS SYNDICATE LEADER BEATEN BY POLICE AND  
EVICTED FROM OFFICE

REF: TUNIS 626 AND PREVIOUS

Classified by DCM Marc Desjardins for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Tunisian Police beat Neji B'ghouri, President of the National Journalists' Syndicate (SNTJ), as he attempted to access the union's headquarters on September 8. That same day, a court ruled in favor of a pro-government faction claiming leadership of the union, and ordered the eviction of B'ghouri and independent unionists from their offices. These developments generated condemnation from international watchdogs, including the AFL-CIO. While GOT interference and manipulation of unions and NGOs, and physical intimidation of activists, is nothing new, its manipulation of the judiciary and the police seems to be getting more blatant. End summary.

¶2. (C) Neji B'ghouri, President of the National Journalist's Syndicate (SNTJ), told us on September 8 that he had been shoved, beaten, and turned back by police as he was approaching syndicate headquarters in downtown Tunis. Though roughed up, B'ghouri said he had not suffered injury. That same day, a Tunisian Court of First Instance issued a judgment in favor of the pro-government faction of the Syndicate which had claimed the leadership of the group for itself (reftel). The court ordered the eviction from Syndicate premises of B'ghouri and his deputies.

¶3. (SBU) Following the police action, B'ghouri made a short video which appeared on Facebook and then September 9 gave an interview to Aljazeera television. B'ghouri recounted the police actions and protested that the government was interfering in the affairs of a private organization. He said the court ruling and the quick police action based on that ruling exposed the government's naked interference in the judiciary and its repression of civil society.

¶4. (SBU) B'ghouri charged the GOT with seeking to "domesticate" the SNJT the same way it pulled the teeth on the Tunisian Association of Judges and the Tunisian League of Human Rights. He also stated that the original executive bureau would continue its efforts to hold a general congress scheduled for September 12 (reftel) but it is not clear whether or not the leadership still has the wherewithal to hold the congress. Within the Syndicate, B'ghouri's independent group has been resisting the pro-government faction and filed its own legal challenge to the pro-government faction's takeover of the syndicate's board. A court hearing in their case has been scheduled for October ¶26.

¶5. (SBU) The International Federation of Journalists protested September 8 the police action, and the "threatening atmosphere." It called on the GOT to offer guarantees that the original executive bureau will be allowed to hold its September 12 general congress. Further, it announced a special planning meeting in November to determine how it can

support the independent journalists in Tunisia. The Committee to Protect Journalists based in New York also condemned the Tunisian court's decision, but said it came as no surprise. The AFL/CIO is also planning to send a letter of protest to President Ben Ali for the GOT's treatment of the union.

¶6. (C) Comment: While GOT interference in professional syndicates and NGOs is by now a well established practice, police manhandling of activists and manipulation of the courts and police is becoming ever more blatant. SNTJ plans to hold a news conference to publicize the situation on September 12. Several Tunisian NGOs/advocacy groups reportedly plan to attend in expression of solidarity. End comment.

GRAY